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SUBJECT: DAILY SUMMARY OF JAPANESE PRESS 01/10/08

INDEX:

- (1) Civil servant reform panel's draft plan proposes establishing personnel agency and banning civil servants from contacting lawmakers in principle (Nikkei)
- (2) Civil servant system reform: Government panel proposes introduction of compensation system to deal with improprieties, pursue responsibility of retired government officials (Sankei)
- (3) Legislature: Part 1 (a): Opposition camp controls Upper House; DPJ also facing policy dilemma (Yomiuri)
- (4) New Komeito secretary general shows understanding for permanent legislation (Nikkei)
- (5) LDP's Upper House Caucus unhappy with ruling bloc's move to abandon plan to first handle the gasoline tax (Tokyo Shimbun)
- (6) UN recognizes greenhouse gas reductions generated by Japan's ODA project in India as CERs (Yomiuri)
- (7) Gist of funding mechanism to counter global warming (Nikkei)
- (8) Possibility of April panic moves closer to reality; If revenue-related bills expired, stock price would plunge and import product prices would surge (Sankei)
- (9) Japan, U.S. agree to build 3 helipads in Okinawa training area

(Okinawa Times)

(10) Gov't enters into full-fledged coordination with Okinawa for Futenma assessment (Okinawa Times)

(11) MOJ to establish special team tasked to investigate immigrants with "disguised visa status" (Mainichi)

ARTICLES:

(1) Civil servant reform panel's draft plan proposes establishing personnel agency and banning civil servants from contacting lawmakers in principle

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Full)
January 10, 2008

It became clear yesterday that the government panel on the comprehensive reform of the civil servant system, chaired by Toshiba Chairman Tadashi Okamura, would produce a draft report later this month with proposals that include the establishment of a cabinet personnel agency to exclusively manage personnel affairs regarding civil servants. The draft plan proposes establishing the post of parliamentary affairs specialist to assist cabinet ministers with Diet responses to prohibit civil servants from making direct contacts with lawmakers. The aim is to break away from the current bureaucratic sectionalism and eliminate collusive ties between legislators and government officials.

Former Economic Planning Agency Director-General Taichi Sakaiya played a central role in drafting the plan. The council will begin discussions starting today based on the draft report. A strong reaction is expected from the Kasumigaseki bureaucratic district

TOKYO 00000082 002 OF 011

that would lose interests. To what extent the draft plan will be reflected in the planned final report remains to be seen.

At present, the National Personnel Authority, a third-party organ, is responsible for making advice on hiring and salaries, the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry Personnel and Pension Bureau for the management of retirement allowances, and the Finance Ministry for the management of housing and the pension system. Under the draft plan, such functions will be integrated into the envisaged personnel agency, which will also be involved in the selection of designated positions (above the councilor level) that are determined independently by each government agency.

Parliamentary affairs specialists, along with cabinet ministers and senior vice ministers, will offer explanations on bills to lawmakers and do the spadework, which have been carried out by senior government officials. Some ten parliamentary affairs specialists who will be selected from civil servants in posts over the division director level will be assigned to the personnel agency in compliance with cabinet ministers' requests. Other public servants will be prohibited from making contacts with lawmakers in principle.

The post of national strategic staffer, a specialist on the level of administrative vice-minister with high-level expertise and experience, will also be established in the cabinet. The prime minister will appoint about ten individuals from senior government officials, academics, and the private sector in order to strengthen the Prime Minister's Official Residence's (Kantei) ability to plan and realize policies.

The first- and second-class employment examinations -- one of the focuses -- will be abolished to introduce three types of tests: general office worker, specialist, and managerial worker. The draft also proposes appointing many general officer workers, specialists, and mid-career workers as senior officials. The effort might end up as no more than changing the sign boards. It is unclear whether the measures can result in the abolition of the rigid career system.

Main points from the draft report by the civil servant system reform council

? Establish a cabinet personnel agency to exclusively handle personnel affairs
? Establish the post of parliamentary affairs specialist to assist cabinet ministers with Diet responses.
? Establish the post of national strategic specialist to assist the Kantei in policy planning.
? Prohibit civil servants other than parliamentary affairs specialists from making direct contacts with lawmakers.
? Replace the existing employment examinations with three types of tests: general office worker, specialist, and managerial worker.
? Actively appoint general office workers and mid-career workers as senior officials.

(2) Civil servant system reform: Government panel proposes introduction of compensation system to deal with improprieties, pursue responsibility of retired government officials

SANKEI (Top play) (Excerpts)
January 10, 2008

TOKYO 00000082 003 OF 011

The government council on the comprehensive reform of the civil servant system, chaired by Toshiba Chairman Tadashi Okamura, decided yesterday to incorporate in its draft report a proposal for establishing a system that will obligate retired government officials, who are found to have committed irregularities, to return their retirement allowances in compensation for inflicting damage on the government. Under the current system, one is not required to return his allowance even if he committed an irregularity that did not escalate into a criminal case or when a penalty for it stopped short of imprisonment. Calls for a review of the current system have been growing in the government.

The pension record fiasco and the issue of hepatitis C by contaminated blood products have caused heavy damage to the Social Insurance Agency and the Health, Labor, and Welfare Ministry, respectively. The panel's decision indicates that it takes those issues seriously. The panel has decided that the government needs a new system to pursue the responsibility of those who handled such issues.

The panel is scheduled to meet today to discuss the draft report with the aim of presenting it to Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda later this month. After receiving the report, the government plans to submit what is tentatively called a civil servant system reform basic bill to the next regular Diet session, expected to open on Jan. 18.

Specifically, in the event a retired government official is found to have committed an irregularity during his tenure of office, the envisaged system allows the government which suffered loss to seek compensation from him and a court to determine the amount of damage in view of his ability to pay. The system also envisages the return of retirement allowances and the confiscation of assets to cover shortfalls.

(3) Legislature: Part 1 (a): Opposition camp controls Upper House; DPJ also facing policy dilemma

YOMIURI (Page 1) (Slightly abridged)
January 9, 2008

Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ or Minshuto) President Ichiro Ozawa during an informal meeting with the Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation) local of Kumamoto held at a Kumamoto City hotel on the evening of Dec. 27 slowly said: "The Upper House has adopted bills covering the pension issue and agricultural policy. However, in the Lower House, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the New Komeito have not even deliberated on those bills. It is shameful. However, nothing can be done because of an overwhelming difference in the number of seats held by the ruling and opposition camps. It is truly regrettable."

The Fukuda government and the ruling parties, which lost their

majority in the Upper House, and the DPJ, which is now the number one party in the upper chamber, all feel blocked in their steering of the Diet.

Ozawa spearheaded the move to submit DPJ-sponsored bills after the Upper House election last July. However, blocked by the wall of ruling camp members in the Lower House, Ozawa last fall even searched for the possibility of forming a grand coalition with the LDP, judging that if the DPJ were to hold policy talks with the LDP,

TOKYO 00000082 004 OF 011

it would become possible for it to follow through with its commitments to the public.

However, he failed to obtain the understanding of the members of his own party. His authority was damaged.

Officials of the Tax Bureau of the Finance Ministry were busy at work on Jan. 2 despite it being the New Year's holidays. They were drafting an amendment to the special taxation measures law in order to extend the time limit of the provisional tax rate imposed on the gasoline tax.

If the legislation fails to secure Diet approval by the end of March, the provisional taxation would expire, cutting gasoline prices by 25 yen per liter starting in April. Should that happen, national tax revenues would drop 1.7 trillion yen a year. The result would be a major shortfall in road construction funds.

Tax-related bills are usually submitted to the Diet in early February. However, with the DPJ calling for a total abolition of the provisional tax, there are no prospects for deliberations to take place in the Upper House. The ruling coalition ordered the Finance Ministry to prepare a bill as soon as possible.

Commenting on Diet deliberations on the draft fiscal 2008 budget, Prime Minister Fukuda during his New Year's press conference on Jan. 4 noted, "There should not be an adverse effect on people's lives. We must have ample opportunities for substantial talks with the DPJ, the number one party in the opposition." If confusion affects the passing of the budget, the administration would be driven into a corner.

Bills submitted by the government and the ruling parties will not clear the Upper House, while those introduced by the DPJ in Upper House will be blocked in the Lower House. There is a possible danger that the Diet, in which the upper and lower houses are controlled by different parties, could become dysfunctional, since it would be impossible key policy proposals to be adopted.

When the Fukuda administration came into office in September last year, Ryuhei Ogawa (53), who is responsible for rating Japan's long-term government bonds at U.S. rating company Standard and Poors, noted in a report sent to clients: "As long as the opposition remains in control of the Upper House, Japan faces a considerable degree of policy risk. It is essential for it to promote structural reforms. However, since a weakened coalition government could lead to stalemate in steering the Diet, it could prevent us from upgrading the ratings of long-term government bonds." Standard and Poors had just upgraded the rating of Japan's government bonds in April, giving high praise to Japan's progress in structural reforms.

Prime Minister Fukuda has shown understanding about hiking the consumption tax rate, saying, "We cannot afford to let the nation's fiscal deficit increase any further." Ogawa took note of this remark. However, even after his meetings with Ozawa, Fukuda was unable to obtain any cooperation from the DPJ. Discussions on the consumption tax issue by the government and the ruling parties have also been put on the back-burner.

A fund manager from a certain country asked Ogawa at the Standard and Poors' office in Singapore, "Is Japan's fiscal management all

TOKYO 00000082 005 OF 011

right?"

Citing various policies incorporated in the draft budget, such as a freeze on an increase in elderly patients' share of medical treatment fees, keeping special-purpose road construction revenues as they are, and an increase in local tax allocations, all of which require more budget funds, Ogawa had no other choice but to say, "It will be difficult for an unstable administration to drastically reconstruct public finances."

(4) New Komeito secretary general shows understanding for permanent legislation

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Full)
January 10, 2008

The government has begun considering enacting a permanent law allowing the country to dispatch the Self-Defense Forces on overseas missions as necessary. New Komeito Secretary General Kazuo Kitagawa yesterday showed some understanding toward such a move by saying to the press: "The ruling bloc's project team will discuss the matter. If common ground is found, we might submit a bill." With strong cautious views in the party in mind, Kitagawa also presented the following conditions as prerequisites: (1) constitutionality, (2) clear weapons-use standards, and (3) thorough civilian control.

(5) LDP's Upper House Caucus unhappy with ruling bloc's move to abandon plan to first handle the gasoline tax

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 2) (Slightly abridged)
January 10, 2008

Shunsuke Shimizu

The ruling bloc intended to first deal with a bill revising the Special Taxation Measures Law ahead of a budget bill for 2008 in order to keep the current temporary tax rates of the so-called gasoline tax (including the benzine tax) beyond April. But it later decided not to do so. This decision has met with voices of discontent in the Upper House Caucus of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Members of the caucus are concerned that they may be forced to take responsibility one-sidedly if the current tax rates expire (on March 31, 2008) as a result of failure to keep them in place beyond their expiration.

"It has now become definite that gasoline prices will decline for a while," a senior member of the LDP Upper House Caucus spat out.

The major opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) is likely to aim to wait for the current temporary tax rates to expire by delaying a vote on the revision bill in the Upper House. However, if the revised bill clears the Lower House by the end of the month and is sent to the Upper House, it is possible to enact the legislation by the end of this fiscal year in accordance with the Constitution's provision that states no action by the Upper House within 60 days after receipt of a bill passed by the Lower House may be determined by the Lower House to constitute a rejection of the said bill by the Upper House.

If the ruling bloc gets budget-related bills to clear the Lower House ahead of a budget bill, the opposition bloc would be certain to vehemently oppose the ruling bloc's unusual attitude like that.

TOKYO 00000082 006 OF 011

So a plan to first deal with the gasoline tax problem ahead of the budget bill was abandoned with a senior member of the LDP Lower House Diet Affairs Committee noting: "If the Diet falls into turmoil, calls for dissolution of the Lower House will erupt."

The senior lawmaker intends to have the revision bill approved as swiftly as possible in the Lower House and prompt the DPJ to agree to take a vote on the revision bill at the end of March, which is the end of this fiscal year.

Even if that bill is rejected (by the Upper House) within this

fiscal year, if the bill is immediately put to a second vote in the Lower House, it is possible to maintain the current temporary tax rate of the gasoline tax.

One plan being considered in the LDP at present is to strongly encourage some DPJ lawmakers who have expressed their understanding about maintaining the current temporary tax rates for the promotion of road construction to revolt against their party.

Meanwhile, a senior member of the LDP Upper House Caucus, which has suffered from the offensive by the DPJ since the it has become the top party in the Upper House by winning last summer's Upper House election, sharply criticized the view taken by the above senior Lower House member: "It's too optimistic if he expects the DPJ to change its mind or some of that party to revolt against the party."

Another senior LDP lawmaker stressed: "The members of the LDP Lower House Caucus are too lenient toward the DPJ. We must pick a fight with the DPJ if necessary." LDP Upper House lawmakers are urging the Lower House members, who, together with members of the junior coalition partner New Komeito, hold an overwhelming majority of seats there, to hold their ground against the DPJ.

(6) UN recognizes greenhouse gas reductions generated by Japan's ODA project in India as CERS

YOMIURI (Page 18) (Excerpts)
January 10, 2008

A subway system that was constructed in India with Japan's official development assistance (ODA) funds and its energy-conservation technology has contributed to reducing about 40,000 tons of carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions annually. It has been decided that Japan will be allowed to use the reduced portion to offset its emissions to help meet its emissions target under the Kyoto Protocol. The United Nations Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) Executive Board last month approved the application of this portion to the CDM - designed to allow greenhouse reductions from projects implemented in developing countries to offset emissions of industrialized countries, regarded them as their certified emissions reductions (CERS) - in response to a request by the governments of Japan and India. This is the second Japan's ODA project to be recognized as a CDM project, following the wind-power construction project in Egypt. Among railway construction projects, this is the first case.

The subway system runs in and around New Delhi. The construction started in 1997, and three lines (59 kilometers in total) constructed in the first stage of the project started operation by 2006. The project costs approximately 278 billion yen, of which about 163 billion yen was disbursed from the yen-loan program.

TOKYO 00000082 007 OF 011

India has concluded a contract with Japan to sell 200,000 tons of emissions reductions to be accrued over five years to Japan Carbon Finance (JCF), a private firm based in Tokyo and invested by 33 Japanese companies, including the Tokyo Electric Power Co. and Nippon Oil Co.

(7) Gist of funding mechanism to counter global warming

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Full)
January 10, 2008

The following is a gist of the government's financial assistance mechanism for developing countries to contain global warming:

"Initiation to Cool Earth 50" and aid to developing countries

? Halve the current level of greenhouse gases emitted from the entire world by 2050.

? Three principles to be kept in designing a specific framework to fight global warming beyond the 2012 timeframe set under the Kyoto Protocol.

1. Include all major greenhouse gas emitters to reduce gases emitted

from the entire world beyond the timeframe set in the Kyoto Protocol.

12. Make a flexible and diversified framework, giving consideration to each country's circumstances.

13. Give priority to both environmental preservation and economic development by making use of energy-conservation and other technologies.

Japan will offer assistance in wide-ranging areas to developing countries that have a lofty aspiration and to developing countries willing to change their policies in response to Japan's request - a new form in which Japan proposes policies and cooperation.

To offer such assistance, Japan will build a new fund mechanism. The government will consider forming a new fund mechanism on a somewhat long-term basis and a considerably large scale, instead of allocating the funds set aside for assistance to developing countries in a conventional way. Japan will call on other industrialized countries and international organs to fall in step with Japan in order to operate the mechanism based on international coordination.

Aid for measures to curb climate changes (reduction in greenhouse gas emissions)

? Enhance the efficiency of energy use and proliferate energy-conservation technology; for instance, help China improve the efficiency of its superannuated thermal power plants. In the case of a medium-sized power plant, an about 5 PERCENT increase in efficiency will contribute to reducing 200,000 tons of carbon dioxide (CO2) per unit annually.

Japan will provide China mainly with technology and other official flows (OOF) than official development assistance (ODA) after Japan stops offering yen loans to that nation.

Aid for developing countries to adjust themselves to climate changes (global warming preventive measures)

TOKYO 00000082 008 OF 011

Carry out projects to cope with climate changes (in such areas as water, agriculture, forest, and disaster-damage prevention).

Prepare and monitor documents kept in developing countries, for instance, make plans on disaster prevention by making use of global simulation, etc.

Improvement in access to energy

Increase the use of alternative energy sources, such as solar heat, water power, and terrestrial heat.

Promote electrification in farm villages and assist communities, for instance, offer aid to develop such villages while protecting the environment, focusing on small-scale alternative energy, water, and forests.

(8) Possibility of April panic moves closer to reality; If revenue-related bills expired, stock price would plunge and import product prices would surge

SANKEI (Page 5) (Full)
January 9, 2008

Ahead of the Jan.18 convocation of the ordinary Diet session, the government and the Liberal Democratic Party-New Komeito ruling coalition are already at odds. There is a growing conflict over the handling of revenue-related bills between the LDP caucus in the House of Councillors, which has called for passage of the bills in January, and its caucus in the House of Representatives, which has taken a cautious stance toward such passage for fear of uproar in the ordinary session from the beginning. The main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ or Minshuto) has called for abolishing the current provisional tariff on the gasoline tax, showing its stance of driving the Prime Minister to dissolve the

Lower House as early as possible. Once the regular session starts under the present situation, the possibility of an "April panic" -- oil-buying-rush, a slump in stocks, and a steep rise in import products -- which would directly affect consumers, will move closer to reality.

"What is the Lower House going to do? They don't understand anything."

"It seems they are saying please confuse the Diet to bring about an early dissolution of the Lower House."

The above conversation was held between senior LDP Upper House members on the afternoon of Jan. 7.

Secretary General Bunmei Ibuki is the first person who enraged the

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LDP Upper House executive. Appearing on a NHK talk show on Jan. 6 wearing a coat worn over armor in feudal Japan, he stated clearly: "It is difficult to end a debate on the revenue-related bills before the end of January."

Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura also said yesterday: "We received various views, but it is not possible in consideration of the Diet schedule (to pass the bills in January)." Even Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda stated in the LDP's New Year party: "We will walk on the right path fairly and squarely. There are some measures but if we take them, we will lose public trust."

TOKYO 00000082 009 OF 011

All the more because Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Tadamori Oshima stated in a meeting in late last year of the Diet affairs chiefs from the two chambers that the revenue-related bills would be enacted before the end of March by using the two-thirds majority vote in the Lower House, the LDP caucus in the Upper House insisted that's not the way they understood it. A senior LDP Upper House member grumbled: "The Lower House still does not understand a fear of April panic."

If the bills do not clear the Lower House by the end of January, they will not be readopted with a two-thirds lower chamber majority override vote, which is allowed by law after 60 days after they were sent to the Upper House. If such happens, about 1000 special taxation measures would automatically lose effect at midnight on April 1.

If the current provisional tariff, including the gasoline tax, becomes invalid, the cost of gasoline would drop by about 25 yen per liter, causing long lines of cars gassing up at gas stations. If the invalidation is prolonged, there would be pressure for a review of the road maintenance and improvement plan, and measures to modify the state budget would be needed.

What is more serious is the special government bond law, a legal basis for the issuance of deficit government bonds, expires. If the law expires, the government would not be able to issue deficit-covering bonds, resulting in a revenue shortfall. In order to cover such a shortfall, the calculation is that it would be necessary to hike the consumption tax by eight percent.

If tariff special measures for about 420 import products are abolished, the import beef rate would rise sharply from 38.5 PERCENT to 50 PERCENT .

Tax deduction for capital investment and tax breaks for foreign companies would also be abolished. Special measures for Tokyo Offshore Market (market scale of about 60 trillion yen), which loans deposits by foreign firms, are discontinued, financial markets would be thrown into confusion. As a result, the trend of "selling Japan" might be accelerated.

In a meeting on Jan. 8 of the secretaries general and Diet affairs chiefs of the LDP and the New Komeito, Ibuki stated: "Since passage of the revenue-related bills is precondition for the budget bill,

there is no theoretical problem for them to be discussed before the budget." Many in the LDP Lower House have a faint hope that the bills will be enacted by the end of March, with one mid-level lawmaker saying, "Since there is no doubt that the opposition wants to avoid a panic, they are supposed to respond to a vote on them." However, a senior LDP member in the Upper House stated clearly: "What lies at the end of panic is the resignation of the cabinet en masse or Lower House dissolution. The opposition will never compromise with us."

Mikio Aoki, former LDP Upper House chairman, who has a strong behind-the-scenes influence as the political boss in the upper chamber, told persons close to him: "When fighting, the party which has more members than the other one will win. I want the party with more members to fight it out."

(9) Japan, U.S. agree to build 3 helipads in Okinawa training area

TOKYO 00000082 010 OF 011

OKINAWA TIMES (Page 2) (Full)
January 10, 2008

TOKYO-Japan and the United States yesterday held a meeting of their intergovernmental joint committee and agreed to build three helipads on the northern side of the U.S. military's training area in Okinawa Prefecture's northern village of Kunigamison. The training area has six helipads, which are to be relocated after the training area is partially returned into local hands. The Japanese government will now enter into an agreement with a contractor to start construction work.

In March last year, the Japanese and U.S. governments agreed to build the other three helipads on the training area's southern side straddling the villages of Kunigamison and Higashison. The Japanese government started construction work there in July last year. The Defense Ministry says the new helipads will be built in about two years. The ministry plans to complete construction work in July 2009.

According to the Defense Ministry, the six new helipads are round-shaped with a diameter of 45 meters. Each helipad has a 15-meter safety clearance zone on both sides. The three helipads on the training area's northern side are estimated at 400 million yen on a contract basis. Japan and the United States have agreed in a final report of the Japan-U.S. Special Action Committee on Facilities and Areas in Okinawa (SACO) to return the training area in part to the extent of about 3,987 hectares.

The six new helipads will be handed over to the U.S. military after they are all completed, the Defense Ministry says. The training area's partial return is expected to take place in July 2009 or after.

(10) Gov't enters into full-fledged coordination with Okinawa for Futenma assessment

OKINAWA TIMES (Page 1) (Full)
January 10, 2008

TOKYO-The government yesterday entered into full-fledged coordination with Okinawa Prefecture to start an environmental impact assessment in early February for the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station to a coastal area of Camp Schwab in the prefecture's northern coastal city of Nago. Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima yesterday met with Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura and Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Masahiro Futehashi at the prime minister's office to confirm that the government will hold its next consultative meeting with officials from Okinawa's prefectural and municipal governments at an early date to discuss the environmental assessment. In the next meeting, Okinawa Prefecture is expected to approve the government's proposal to sample corals for its environmental assessment.

Okinawa Prefecture has asked the government to think twice about how to survey the relocation site's environs and release its forecast of

the possible impact of Futenma relocation on the environment before conducting the environmental assessment. "I have told the Defense Ministry to give (Okinawa Prefecture) more detailed explanations," a high-ranking government official said. This official also said, "There are not so difficult problems." The official expects that the

TOKYO 00000082 011 OF 011

government and Okinawa Prefecture can agree in the next consultative meeting to set about the environmental assessment, saying: "There are not so many difficulties. We are now ready to go ahead."

Gov. Nakaima is to set forth his statement on Jan. 21 about the government's environmental assessment plan. The government is now coordinating with Okinawa Prefecture to hold the next consultative meeting late this month after that. The government plans to lay down a V-shaped pair of airstrips on the premises of Camp Schwab as an alternative for Futenma airfield. Okinawa Prefecture and Nago City have proposed moving the construction site to an offshore area. The government is expected to exchange views with Okinawa's prefectural and municipal governments on this proposal in the next consultative meeting.

(11) MOJ to establish special team tasked to investigate immigrants with "disguised visa status"

MAINICHI (Page 3) (Full)
January 3, 2008

Takashi Sakamoto

The Ministry of Justice's (MOJ) Immigration Bureau decided to form a special team tasked to analyze information about and lay bare immigrants with "disguised residential status" as the number of cases of foreigners working beyond their initial visa status granted by Japan is on the rise.

The revised law on the Employment Promotion Law, which includes a system for employers to report to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) about names of foreign employees and other items, went into effect in last October. With this kind of information available to the MOJ, the Immigration Bureau now can constantly grasp the situation of employment and separation of foreign workers. This information is said to be helpful to examine, for instance, the case of an immigrant with a student visa continuing to work at a restaurant or the case of an immigrant who entered Japan in the disguise of being a wife of a Japanese national working at a place far away from her house.

The special team was formed in last October and consists of 58 officials coming mainly from the Tokyo Immigration Bureau. Of them, 15 are engaged in analyzing information provided by the MHLW, and 43 engaged in investigating and exposing cases of foreign nationals illegally working here in Japan. If the MOJ finds foreign nationals are working without working visas, it will cancel their residential status and take the procedures for deportation.

There were 594 cases of immigrants with disguised visa status in 2001, but the number of those cases exposed in 2006 reached 1,736. "It is difficult to expose immigrants with disguised visa status unlike fake passports. All we can do is to expose a small fraction of the real figure," a senior immigration official said.

Meanwhile, some people express concern about the application of the reporting system to foreign workers. For instance, the Japan Federation of Bar Association has lodged a protest against the reporting system, citing the reason that the system violates foreigners' privacy.

DONOVAN